

## Mongolia's first native priest



Mongolia's first native priest speaks about his mission Catholicism has a patchy history in Mongolia but Father Enkh Baatar wants to change that. It was a historic moment for the Mongolian Catholic Church when the country's first native priest was ordained on Aug. 28. Father Joseph Enkh Baatar, 29, could be the first local to be ordained in a millennium.

The new priest was ordained at Ss. Peter and Paul Cathedral in the national capital Ulaanbaatar. The service was attended by about 1,500 people and led by Bishop Wenceslao Padilla, Apostolic Prefect of Ulaanbaatar.

"I hope Father Enkh [will] be a Good Samaritan to the people of Mongolia," said Bishop Lazzaro You Heung-sik from the South Korean Daejeon diocese where Father Enkh trained and studied to be a priest.

Mongolia has some 1,200 Catholics. The Catholic Church's presence in Mongolia is small, only 0.04 percent of the 2.7 million people and, out of 21 provinces, 17 have no Church presence at all.

But the young priest is undeterred. "Jesus said that the harvest is big and the workers are few," he said. "If you are serving God and his people wholeheartedly, it does not matter which nationality or congregation you are. You are a big help in the evangelization not only of Mongolia but the whole world."

Father Enkh said he was "happy and honored" to be ordained but the idea that he is the first Mongolian priest in a millennium was an exaggeration.

"Actually the first missionaries to come to the Mongol Empire were the Nestorians in the 7th Century and they converted many tribes," he explained. "The first Catholic missionaries arrived in the 13th century during the Yuan Dynasty and some historical accounts claim there were about 30,000 Catholics back then so there were probably plenty of clergy ... so I don't consider myself the first indigenous priest."

The fall of the Yuan Dynasty, combined with the emergence of the Chinese Ming dynasty eradicated

Catholicism in Mongolia for centuries. "There are many reasons why there is such a big gap between the first proclamation of the Gospel in Mongolia and the church's new beginning today," Father Enkh said.

"The rise of Muslims in the Middle East blocked missionaries because Mongolia is a landlocked country and then, starting from the 16th Century, Tibetan Buddhism arrived and eventually became the national religion. Mongolia then became a communist country in 1924 and the Catholic Church ceased the small amount of evangelization that was happening at that time. It was only after the fall of communism that the first three missionaries came to Mongolia in 1992," he said.

After long years of Communism, during which religious belief was suppressed, the new missionaries had to start from scratch. They first sought to help locals struggling with poverty.

The missionary priests began by propping up a near-bankrupt orphanage, teaching foreign languages to students and founding programs to deal with the rampant alcoholism. When it came to evangelizing, one strategy was to bore a water hole for the animals of nomadic tribes, engaging the herders when they brought their animals to drink, according to the Catholic Herald.

"The Catholic Church in Mongolia is only 24 years old and will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year," the new priest said. "It really takes time and effort to evangelize because Mongolia has deep roots in Tengerism [a shamanistic religion] and Buddhism. People still look at Christianity as a foreign religion and even a threat to their culture."

Before he was ordained, Father Enkh earned a degree in biotechnology from the International Mongolian University. His parents, reassured by the qualification, then allowed him to enter Daejeon Seminary in South Korea where he studied for eight years.

"We need more Mongolian priests because they will know how to better apply the teachings of Christ and the church to our country," he said after his ordination. "Only then will the Mongols understand that Catholicism is not just a foreign religion but something that is close to their tradition, culture and way of life."